

**WATAUGA RIVER BLUFFS
CLASS II NATURAL-SCIENTIFIC STATE NATURAL AREA**

COUNTY:	Carter	ACREAGE:	50
7.5° QUADRANGLE:	Johnson City	OWNERSHIP:	State of Tennessee
PHYSIOGRAPHIC PROVINCE:	Ridge and Valley	YEAR DESIGNATED:	1998

DESCRIPTION:

Watauga River Bluffs is a 50-acre natural area located in Carter County along the Watauga River. Its most conspicuous feature is the steep slope that drops more than 200 feet to the river's edge. The slope and the narrow bluffs make up most of the 50 acres. It is ecology noteworthy because Watauga River Bluff supports the largest known population of the state listed Carolina pink (*Silene caroliniana*). This population is mostly concentrated in an open dry chestnut oak forest occurring on the west to south facing upper slopes. This community has white ash as an associate canopy species and a subcanopy comprised of bitternut hickory, eastern red cedar, and serviceberry. This community has a spare herbaceous layer. This is a successional forest that is estimated to be approximately 60 or more years old.

The steep slopes are extremely fragile as shale fragments continuously slough off and results in talus that accumulates near the bottom. The chestnut oak extends down slope where more mesic conditions and deeper soils support white oak, eastern hemlock, tulip poplar, and yellow buckeye trees. There is an area adjacent to the bluff where hemlock is prevalent. This area, and much of the lower slopes are rich with spring wildflowers and ferns that include hepatica, trilliums, spring beauties, Jacobs ladder, and trout lily. A scenic 40 to 50 foot waterfall cascades from the bluff in the northeast part of the natural area. Recent storm damage however has opened the canopy near the falls resulting in displacement of native trees by the invasive exotic tree-of-heaven.

The river bluff natural area has been undeveloped and unoccupied since the 1950's. Today it remains a rugged landscape harboring a diverse plant community. Its varied mix of habitats, soil depth, and other geological features may yield more rare species upon further investigation. The surrounding area has been used for agriculture in the past and is now a residential area interspersed with old pastures. The area south of the bluffs has been scarred by coal and shale extraction and has been planted in clover and fescue. The spread of invasive exotic pest plants pose a serious problem because of past disturbance and a fragmented landscape.

SITE MANAGEMENT:

Division of Natural Heritage, 401 Church Street, 14th Floor L&C Tower, Nashville, TN 37243-0447, (615) 532-0431.

PUBLIC ACCESS:

No access has been developed.